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MILK RIVER WATERSHED NEWS

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New Milk River Storage Project In Alberta: One Canadian's Perspective

By Ken Miller

As recently as last March I teetered on the verge of trading the whole Milk River country for a big yellow dog and then shooting him. This country sure can change in short order. The protracted drought and concomitant water shortages may be abating — but only till next time. Tree ring studies in the Cypress Hills and Bearpaws indicate even more severe drought has occurred in the 1880's and 1790's. Consequently, here in Alberta we are revisiting twenty-year old studies for a water management storage project about twelve miles west of the town of Milk River.

THE PROBLEM: ALBERTA PERSPECTIVE

In dry years as much as 90% of the water flowing past the town of Milk River is St. Mary diversion water returning to Montana. This overactive flow results in turbidity, scouring, and cut banks that slump about six inches per year. It's tough on fisher people and the storage capacity in Fresno. More importantly, municipal water supplies for Coutts/ Sweetgrass, Milk River, and several rural water co-ops are faced with low reserves of water in the winter months that leave little room to manage emergency water use such as fire supression. Because we have no water storage facilities on the Alberta side, a moratorium restricting irrigation to the existing 5,000 acres was imposed in the mid-80's. Pumping has been stopped in mid-July in recent years. On average about 40,000 acre-feet of "Canadian" spring freshet is passed unused to Fresno Reservoir annually. With a Canadian water storage facility, about 15,000 new acres of irrigation could be developed — resulting in a forceful and sustainable positive impact on our basin's economy.

THE PROBLEM: A MONTANA PERSPECTIVE

Involvement with the MRIA has evolved my thinking of the basin as a whole natural system without the kryptonite effects of the International Boundary. What I see in Montana is not pretty — mostly the 110,000 acre Montana system has been rode hard and put up wet. Especially major components of the St. Mary diversion system which are deteriorating and just plain old. Fresno is a quarter silted in and irrigation water is in short supply about half of the time. Evolution to higher valued and better paying crops than barley and alfalfa will not happen without a secure supply of fall irrigation water. A forage based feedlot industry, seed pota-

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Early June Rains Should Save This Irrigation Season

By R. Scott Guenthner, Bureau of Reclamation

Prospects for a good water supply looked grim last fall when reservoir storage was extremely low. Things did not improve over the winter with lower than normal precipitation and moderate temperatures. Water managers and water users had been commiserating over the poor water supply outlook even into early June. Fortunately, our crystal balls aren't always that clear. The cool months of March, April and May stalled off crop growth and thus the need for irrigation water. Even with that good luck we prepared for a tough season of water delivery.

Montanans have often said that one of the beauties of the state is the ever-changing weather. Boy, can it change! And that change often affects our streamflows and, ultimately, water supply. That's what happened as a result of the June 8 through June 11 rainstorms across northcentral Montana. Actually, from a water manager's perspective, I think of two distinct benefits from that timely rainfall, what happened upstream of Fresno Reservoir and what happened in the irrigated valley downstream. Rainfall upstream of Fresno Reservoir, in Alberta, was reported to be in excess of 8 inches at some locations. Fortunately, this was a relatively steady rainfall and much of this moisture soaked into the dry soil and subsoil. Even with the dry soil, inflows to Fresno Reservoir were at a record or near record peak. Total inflow during June was the highest of any month since Fresno Reservoir was constructed in 1939. This large inflow filled Fresno Reservoir by June 15, the first time Fresno Reservoir has been filled since 1997. Less rain fell, seemingly in decreasing amounts from Havre towards Glasgow. This rain satisfied the water demand by the crops, and excess flow in the Milk River was used on lands that most thought wouldn't receive irrigation water this year.

Compare this picture of the spillway at Fresno, taken in June, to the picture below, taken in March.

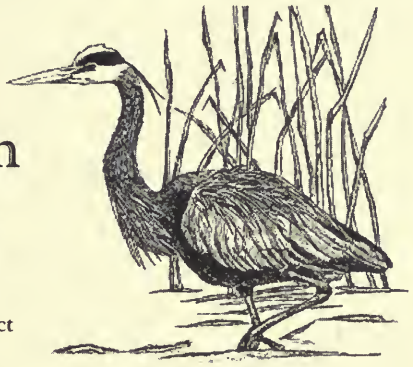
Compare this picture of the spillway at Fresno, taken in March, to the picture above, taken in June.

Lake Sherburne near Glacier Park is essentially full and Fresno Reservoir was near full at the beginning of July. This should provide water users with a near-normal water supply for the remainder of the irrigation season. Water conservation efforts should continue even with the seemingly good water supply. Remember, this is Montana! ✓

Heart of the Highline Tour Scheduled for September

The Milk River International Alliance, in cooperation with Hill, Blaine, Phillips and Valley County Conservation Districts, are sponsoring "The Heart of the Hi-Line Tour" on September 11 & 12. The actual tour will begin at Fresno Dam and conclude in the Glasgow Irrigation District. The tour will focus on irrigation project structures and practices, with some recreation and municipality interests. The special attraction will be a panel discussion entitled "Sustaining Flow in the Milk River, the Lifeline of the Hi-Line" with representatives from the following: Senator Conrad Burns, Senator Max Baucus, Representative Denny Rehberg, Governor Judy Martz, Alberta Provincial Government, and US Bureau of Reclamation. There will be a registration fee that will cover all the meals. For registration forms, stop by any of the Milk River Conservation District offices.

Negotiating Reserved Water Rights For Bowdoin National Wildlife Refuge



By Joan Specking

In June 2002, the Montana Reserved Water Rights Compact Commission (Commission) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) met to discuss federal reserved water rights for Bowdoin National Wildlife Refuge near Malta. The Commission and the FWS have finalized compacts for three of the six National Wildlife Refuges with federal reserved water rights in Montana: Benton Lake, Black Coulee and Red Rock Lakes. The three remaining Refuges are Bowdoin, Charles M. Russell/UL Bend National Wildlife, and the National Bison Range.

The 15,551-acre Bowdoin National Wildlife Refuge was established by presidential executive order in 1936 as a refuge and breeding ground for migratory birds and other wildlife. The Refuge includes an island nesting complex attracting pelicans, cormorants and blue herons, as well as many other species of water birds. Recently, the Refuge received designation as a Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network site; one of two in Montana. Close to 50,000 shorebirds have been documented on the Refuge, including 38 different species. The diversity of birds and waterfowl draws the interest of schools, birdwatchers, tourists and hunters, among others.

Bowdoin was a topic of discussions in 1999 when negotiators were working on a compact with the Gros Ventre and Assiniboine of the Fort Belknap Reservation. At the time, the negotiating parties considered the proximity of Bowdoin to the Milk River Project and discussed problems with salinity in the area and mitigation options including: whether water could be brought into Bowdoin from Nelson Reservoir if a pump-lift from the Milk River was built; increasing deliveries from Dodson Canal; and diverting flood flows from Beaver Creek. All of these possibilities would require FWS to develop a discharge plan meeting State Department of Environmental Quality water quality standards, and preventing downstream irrigators from receiving an excessive amount of salt in their irrigation water.

Summary of the FWS Preliminary Proposal for Bowdoin Federal Reserved Water Rights

The FWS proposal for Bowdoin generally mirrors the status quo for the Refuge. Valid existing State-based water rights will be protected in the affected watersheds. A summary of the FWS proposal for Bowdoin follows:

- The right to store water to spillway or management level in all existing Refuge pools.
- The right to develop additional flow through ponds in small drainages entering the main impoundments, using groundwater, local runoff or delivered water.
- The right to 15 acre-feet of groundwater for Refuge headquarters use and the right to develop an additional 8 acre-feet of groundwater for future use at this or a nearby site.
- The right to develop an amount of groundwater (not yet specified) for wildlife and stock use if supplemental water is needed.
- The right to develop 200 acre-feet of groundwater within the Black Coulee drainage for wildlife use when surface flows are insufficient.
- Black Coulee provides up to 5,000 acre-feet annually to the Refuge. Irrigators on Black Coulee have water rights senior to the FWS. The FWS would like the basin to be closed to new uses.
- The right to the continued beneficial use of natural Beaver Creek flood flows through development of diversion facilities permitting diversion of up to 14,000 acre-feet whenever there are surplus water conditions. FWS

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(Milk River Storage Project Continued from Page 1)

toes dry beans, and alfalfa seed to name a few could put some chickens back in New Deal pots. On a positive note, rationalizing the eight districts into the Joint Board of Control, as well as improvements on-farm and district management practices, have gone a long way to improve the efficiency of water utilization.

The MRIA is committed to tasks outlined in a Federal 319 grant to perform a water quality data inventory and assessment as part of a local effort to develop a basin management plan and thereby accommodate the Federal Clean Water Act. Resolution of reserved water right claims, along with the Compact Commission's mitigation process, will likely exacerbate ongoing water deficiencies in the lower basin.

Both sides of the border have a problem with the outward migration of capital, but our most serious problem in my view, is that our most vital resource — a large part of our younger generation (usually the best ones) are forced to leave to find jobs. This will kill us in the long run.

SOLUTIONS

Reflecting back on nearly fifty harvests that I have participated in, it never ceases to amaze me the gardening, butchering and other terrible work involved in subsistence prairie living. I often wonder at the courage and the grit that it took our grandparents to stay here a hundred years ago. There was nothing — no towns, no trees or schools, no hospitals or things in general. But there was freedom — even if it was to fail, but mostly there was the strong belief that every one of those homestead shacks was a manifestation of a bright future for that family. Look ahead, not back.

One solution to our problem of eroding infrastructure, rural depopulation and missed economic opportunities imposed by water shortages would be to do nothing. Those pioneers would not be impressed.

There are a number of technical solutions to enhancing and securing water supplies in the basin. Rehabilitation of the St. Mary diversion system is necessary including increasing the canal capacity, but at great cost. The Nelson Reservoir lift pump is being looked at as a partial solution. Inter-basin transfers from the Missouri or Tiber have also been looked at but are also very expensive. Naturally any project would require extensive economic and environmental evaluations.

Spurred on by the recent drought, there has been a revival of Alberta interest in a water management project (dam). A medium size reservoir could address Canadian concerns regarding municipal water, recreation and provide secure water for both existing and new irrigation. It seems to me that the maximum sized impoundment, at a cost of about an additional 15 million dollars, could provide considerable benefit to the lower basin residents in the form of multi-year storage from high runoff years and also to extend the delivery season of St. Mary water from the usual 120 days now, to nearly year round, thereby solving problems with supply limitation, scouring, fishing and municipal water flows.

THE FUTURE

Public awareness of the magnitude and urgency of the problem is only a beginning. Make no mistake rehabilitation of our basin water resource is not a one shot fix. The process is both complex and ongoing as befits any living organism. Identifying and quantifying alternative sources and selecting the most appropriate solution will be a formidable task. A broad-based, basin-wide, proactive political constituency needs to be assembled to convince state/provincial/federal/International Joint Commission officials to get onside, all at the same time. Talk about ducks in a row.

One very positive thing going for us is our history of object lessons. The nearly one hundred year-old Spite Ditch that was constructed just west of the town of Milk River to demonstrate that the St. Mary diversion water could be recaptured and diverted back to Canada (checkmate). This project ended unceremoniously in a pasture twelve miles from the weir — it failed. What did succeed was a pragmatic and formal sharing of the Basin's water resources through the Boundary Water Treaty of 1909 and subsequent Apportionment Order of 1921. Only through cooperative efforts can the basin residents perpetuate our oasis culture. Our pioneer ancestors prevailed over more formidable obstacles.

Ken is a 3rd generation farmer/rancher from the Milk River, Alberta area.

Representatives on the Milk River JBC:

Kay Blatter	Chairman	Fort Belknap Irr. Dist.	**Casey Kienenberger**	Member	Malta Irr. Dist.
Hugh Brookie	Vice-Chairman	Malta Irr. Dist.	**Ralph Snider**	Member	Harlem Irr. Dist.
Melvin Novak	Secretary	Glasgow Irr. Dist.	**Bruce Anderson**	Member	Paradise Valley Irr. Dist.
Lee Cornwell	Member	Glasgow Irr. Dist.	**Brad Tilleman**	Member	Zurich Irr. Dist.
Jack Gist	Member	Alfalfa Valley Irr. Dist.	**Floyd Blair**	Member	Dodson Irr. Dist.

North Central Regional Feasibility Study Update

By Brent Esplin, Bureau of Reclamation

In December 1999, Congress authorized the Bureau of Reclamation to begin the North Central Regional Feasibility Study. The intent of the Study, as outlined in the authorizing legislation, is "to evaluate water and related resources in North-Central Montana...to determine...how those resources can best be managed and developed to serve the needs of the citizens of Montana." The study area under consideration is the Milk, Marias, and St Mary River Basins.

The goals of the Study include identification of potential mitigation measures in support of settlement of Federally reserved water rights in the basin and identifying water, environmental, recreational, and other related needs in the basin. Federally reserved water rights in the basin include those associated with the Blackfeet, Rocky Boys, and Fort Belknap Indian Reservations and the Bowdoin National Wildlife Refuge.

The January 2001 edition of this newsletter contained an article, titled Feasibility Study Looks at Milk River Mitigation Alternatives, which outlined the alternatives currently under consideration for mitigation of the Fort Belknap Reserved Water Right Compact. The Study is also looking at potential mitigation measures of the Bowdoin National Wildlife Refuge and Blackfeet Indian Reservation Reserved Water Right Compacts if and when the respective parties negotiate them.

In June 2001, Reclamation, in cooperation with the Milk River Joint Board of Control initiated a canal efficiency study to assess the need and potential benefits of measures related to the Milk River Project canal conveyance system and the river system. Results for the canal efficiency study will be used to update parameters in the Hydrology model. This will assist in the determination of benefits associated with efficiency improvements to the conveyance system and improving the operation of the Milk River Irrigation Project. This study is entering it's second year. With the improved water supply we are able to collect data over a longer period of time and in different conditions compared to last year's drought mode.

Evaluation of the proposed Nelson Pumping Plant continues to go forward. We are currently evaluating the appropriate size for the pumping plant to make to most efficient use of the Milk River's water supply in a cost-effective manner and to make better use of Nelson Reservoir to meet the Project's needs. A value engineering study was completed that evaluated the different alternatives and associated cost.

Reclamation's Geology Group recently completed their assessment of foundation conditions on the St. Mary Canal system and at new potential dam sites. The foundation assessment is used as an early indicator of the suitability of potential dam sites to determine their cost effectiveness to construct or modify existing structures. Foundation drilling was completed at two sites Peoples Creek, located on the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation, and Nelson Reservoirs proposed upper dike dam site.

Reclamation is utilizing HYDROSS as the hydrology model to evaluate the impacts to

Goldstone Bridge crosses the Milk River approximately 15 miles north of Fresno Reservoir and lies about half way between Fresno and the Canadian Border. The river was about a half mile wide at this location, flows peaked around 14,000 cfs at the Eastern Crossing; an all time high.

(Feasibility Study Update Continued from Page 5)

the way the system is operated and benefits of each of the alternatives identified by the Study. As alternatives are identified they are compared to a baseline condition that represents current conditions for evaluation. For the purpose of the Study, the present condition assumes failure of the St Mary Canal system so the basin is operating exclusively on Milk River water to meet needs of the Reservations, municipalities, agriculture, recreation, and environmental concerns.

For the past couple of years, Reclamation has worked with interested parties to assess fishery information in the Study area. Of particular interest are the bull trout in the St. Mary Drainage. The Bull trout were recently listed as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act. An entrainment study at the St. Mary Canal Headworks was set up this spring with the intent of collecting baseline data prior to the installation of an experimental electronic fish barrier this fall. Collection of baseline data was hindered by the high St. Mary flow as a result of the late spring snowstorm and the canal being shut off so emergency repairs could be made to the canal. Collection of baseline data will resume once the canal is operational.

Recent information has come available on genetic sampling of bull trout in this basin as well. Testing has shown that the fish from Kennedy Creek (which is below the St. Mary Diversion Dam) are very similar genetically to fish from Boulder Creek (above the dam). This shows that these fish have functioned in the past as one population, which supports the data that has been collected showing movement of bull trout between these two drainages and emphasizes the need for passage over the diversion dam.

On the Milk River, this spring provided a good opportunity to

(Continued on Last Page)

Coordinator's Corner

By Jim Thompson

Congress passed the Clean Water Act in 1972 to make our water "fishable and swimmable." In 1987 Congress added Section 319 to the CWA that addresses non-point source (NPS) pollution. As part of Section 319, states were required to assess their water bodies for NPS impairments, develop NPS management plans, implement those plans, and report plan implementation to the EPA. One of the things included in the plan is Total Maximum Daily Loads (TMDL). A TMDL is the total amount of a pollutant, per day, that a waterbody may receive from any source without exceeding the state water quality standards.

The Milk River was listed as an impaired stream. What does that mean? It means a plan will be made using a watershed approach to voluntarily implement Best Management Practices (BMPs) to restore and protect our water from NPS pollution. Who's making these plans? Montana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) attempts to find partners to develop and implement plans such as federal, state and local agencies, as well as private groups and volunteers. The EPA has taken leadership in several watersheds throughout Montana. Fortunately, I feel the Milk River, through the MRIA, Conservation Districts, Irrigation Districts, working with local, state and federal agency personnel have been given the opportunity to determine to great extent just what the potential of the Milk River is and how it should be managed.

I, as project coordinator, have taken this thing to heart, and with local guidance and direction, will work hard to pull it all together. By court order, all Montana waters are required to develop TMDLs by May 5, 2007, so we have the time to do it right.

I ran into my old friend who raises geese along the Milk River the other day. I found him working on his tractor and he said the geese were happy but then his tractor broke down; if it isn't one thing it's another. I watched him for awhile, his knuckles bleeding and sweat soaking his shirt. He finally sat down and said, "You know Jim, you need the right tool to get the job done right, plus it makes the work a lot more enjoyable." I said, "I agree, but a little WD 40 never hurts either."

Jim

(Bowdoin National Wildlife Refuge Continued from Page 3)

will agree to subordinate its rights to valid existing State-based rights in return for a prohibition on new on-stream storage and new irrigation from direct Beaver Creek diversions.
Should the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation (BOR) construct a reservoir on Beaver Creek as part of the rehabilitation of the Milk River Project, the prohibition on new storage could be modified to exempt it in return for an allocation of water to Bowdoin.

- An unquantified right to divert water for firefighting pur poses.

Milk River Project Water

The Refuge was originally part of the Milk River Project managed by the BOR, however, the FWS now has sole jurisdiction. The FWS contributed to the construction of Fresno Reservoir and as a result they receive 3,500 acre-feet per year of Milk River Project water, subject to irrigation demands. In addition, the Refuge has an 8,000 acre-foot State-based water right use claim from the Project, for water excess to irrigation needs. This water right claim was filed with the concurrence of the BOR. The claim amount was based on several years of very high deliveries from the Project. The FWS would like to pursue additional deliveries from the Project in the future. The FWS Project water is not part of the FWS federal reserved water right.

The FWS and the Commission are continuing to do technical evaluations of the Bowdoin proposal. The FWS will develop a more specific proposal for Beaver Creek and will work on a water discharge plan. The Commission has asked the FWS to consider two of the proposals for improvement of the Milk River Project: the proposed Nelson pump-lift mitigation alternative, and the repair of the Dodson Canal and diversion dam, which is the main source of Project water to Bowdoin. The Commission considers these proposals beneficial to both the Project and to the Refuge. The FWS and the Commission will schedule a negotiating session for later this fall, and will talk to water users in the area about their concerns. If people would like to be on the Commission mailing list for future negotiating sessions and public meetings, please send your name and address to: RWRCC, 1625 11th Avenue, P.O. Box 201601, Helena, MT 59620-1601, email: rwrcc@state.mt.us or call (406) 444-6841. ✓

Debris behind gates at Dodson Dam.

Fresno spilling as it reached its peak on June 18th, with 18 inches of water going over the spillway. This is the first time Fresno has filled since 1997.

If you have ideas for articles or news items, please contact:

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(Feasibility Study Update Continued from Page 5)

do some fish sampling with a high pulse of water as the late spring snow storm's runoff worked it's way down the river. Preliminary results show large, benthic fish of the Missouri River utilizing the lower section of the Milk River below the Vandalia Diversion Dam. Species such as adult paddlefish and blue suckers were found in the section below Vandalia Diversion Dam to the confluence with the Missouri River. Sampling of larval fish performed during and immediately after the high flow will be analyzed this fall to determine what species used the Milk for spawning.

Reclamation will publish and make available a complete list of the current alternatives under consideration, complete with the estimated cost, benefits, impacts, etc. of each of the impacts in a Alternative Scoping Document scheduled for release to the public in the fall of 2002. Public meetings will be scheduled this fall to discuss the alternatives with the public and solicit comments on the identified alternatives. The Alternative Scoping Document is a work in progress and will be updated as needed as additional alternatives are identified.

From the list of alternatives we will select the most promising alternatives for further refinement. Public input will be key in the selection of alternatives that are moved forward.

If you have specific questions, please feel free to contact Brent Esplin, the Feasibility Study Team Leader, at 406.247.7489 or by e-mail at besplin@gp.usbr.gov. ✓

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Development Association Formed to Support Milk River Project

By Randy Reed, Chairman MRPDA

The Milk River Project Development Association (MRPDA) was formed to seek Congressional authorization for rehabilitating the Milk River Project. The MRPDA is a coalition of sportsmen, irrigators, tribal, and municipal water users. It is very apparent to them that without strong public involvement and support, the rehabilitation of the project will never happen. The St. Mary canal and diversion works are in desperate need of rehabilitation. Without this repair, the Milk River water supply will dwindle in reliability and quantity as maintenance costs for an aging system will continue to rise and threaten the economic viability of all water users and citizens in the Milk River basin.

The North Central Montana Feasibility Study is nearing completion by the United States Bureau of Reclamation (USBR). This is a golden time for the MRPDA to seek Congressional authorization and funding for study recommendations. USBR cannot lobby Congress; so it is our responsibility to persuade Congress that the rehabilitation of the project is important enough to justify the costs. Time is of the essence -- the structural integrity of the St. Mary system is in jeopardy. We simply cannot wait another decade while all the "what ifs" are analyzed and re-analyzed.

The Fort Belknap Compact is the best, and perhaps the only vehicle to obtain Congressional authorization to fix the St. Mary's system. Currently, the Fort Belknap Compact is stalled in the Department of Interior and needs to be nudged forward.

Members of our Association toured the St. Mary system in July. It was quite an eye opener to see the debilitating condition of the diversion works. As a result of the tour, the Havre Chapter of Walleyes Unlimited sponsored a meeting with Senator Baucus's staff member, Kim Falcon. USBR was present at the meeting and provided us the opportunity to inform Kim of the problems and needs of the system. Also, it was an opportunity to encourage approval and ratification of the compact. We thought the meeting was productive.

Much more needs to be done. We need to meet and obtain support from Senator Burns and Representative Rehberg. To keep this issue on the forefront of our Congressional delegation, postcards were printed en masse, describing briefly the problems that face the Milk River Project. They were distributed throughout the basin and were sent to our delegation by basin residents. A follow-up letter to the postcards, was also sent to the delegation last spring. The letter was also mailed to Secretary of Interior Gail Norton, which encouraged them to approve the Fort Belknap Compact. It is very important that we push the compact through the Department of Interior. Please call our Congressional delegation and local legislators.

In closing, to preserve our use of the Milk River Project water and stabilize the economy of North Central Montana we all need to work together to obtain congressional authorization and funding to rehabilitate the St. Mary diversion works.

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Milk River International Alliance "Heart of the Hi-Line Tour"

By Shilo Messerly, NRCS

The "Heart of the Hi-Line Tour" was held on September 11 and 12, 2002. Forty-five people from Montana and Alberta toured the reach of the Milk River from Fresno Dam to Vandalia Dam. A public forum was held in Malta on the first evening. As you probably know, the Milk River Project furnishes water for approximately 121,000 irrigated acres that extend 200 miles along the Milk River from northwest Havre to southeast of Nashua.

Highlights of the tour included stops at Fresno Dam; Lohman, Paradise Valley, Dodson, and Vandalia diversion dams; Harlem #1 Pump and Dodson Pump; Bowdoin National Wildlife Refuge; Chinook Water Treatment Plant; and Nelson Reservoir. A number of presentations were given along the way. Participants were able to see the many physical and financial challenges of delivering water through this large, but degrading irrigation project, as well as seeing the benefits resulting from it.

The first stop on the tour was Fresno Dam. Brent Esplin, a U.S. Bureau of Reclamation (USBR) engineer gave an overview of the dam. He informed the group that Fresno Dam was constructed in 1939, and designed to store 130,000 acre-feet. It stores and regulates water supplies for: nine Milk River Project Irrigation Districts; USBR pump contracts; Fort Belknap BIA Irrigation Project; municipal water for the communities of Havre, Chinook, and Harlem; Hill County Rural Water District; and Bowdoin National Wildlife Refuge. Over the years, more and more fishermen from across Montana have enjoyed catching the walleye and northern pike that are found in Fresno Reservoir. However, a 1999 survey revealed that siltation has reduced the reservoir capacity to 93,000 acre-feet, with average storage losses of 500 acre-feet per year.

Lohman Diversion Dam

Several irrigation structures were visited in the Chinook Division including Lohman and Paradise Valley diversion dams, Cemetery Siphon and Harlem Pump Station #1. Tour participants saw the damage to the diversion dams caused by the June storms, and were awakened when they heard the high cost associated with running the pumps as a sole source of irrigation water. In August alone, Harlem Irrigation District's power bill was almost $8,000.

The tour also stopped at the Chinook Water Treatment Plant. The Chinook and Havre plant operators explained how Milk River water is converted into drinkable water. The communities of Havre, Chinook and Harlem receive their municipal water supply from the Milk River

(Continued on next page)

Heart of the Highline Sidebar

On the Evening of September 11, 2002, irrigators from Alberta and Montana along with State and Federal officials, held a public forum in conjunction with the Heart of the Hi-Line Tour sponsored by the Milk River International Alliance. Most of the discussion centered on water shortages in the basin. The main subjects talked about were the potential for development of Canadian water rights on the Milk River, siltation of Fresno Reservoir, rehabilitation of the Saint Mary diversion works, and the North-Central Montana Regional Feasibility Study. Total Maximum Daily Loads and watershed planning were also topics for discussion.

(Hi-Line Tour Continued from previous page)

Project. Their allotment is quantified in contracts with the USBR.

To emphasize the importance of Saint Mary River water to the Milk River System, a brief stop was made at a damaged section of pipe from the Saint Mary Siphon.

Vandalia Dam

Kay Blatter, Milk River International Alliance Chairman, and President of the Milk River Project Joint Board of Control, discussed the age and deteriorating nature of the Saint Mary diversion works. On average, 70 percent of the Milk River water supply comes from the Saint Mary River, and as much as 95 percent in dry years. The section of pipe is being moved around the basin to raise awareness of the extreme importance of Saint Mary River water to the basin's survival.

The second day of the tour started with a visit to Dodson Dam. Built in 1910, and rehabilitated in 1952, it is again in need of major repairs with an estimated cost of $2.2 million. Dodson Dam diverts water to irrigate over 42,000 acres in Malta Irrigation District. Additionally, Dodson Dam diverts water for the Dodson Pump Unit, Bowdoin National Wildlife Refuge, and Nelson Reservoir.

Mark Sullivan of the Montana Department of Fish Wildlife and Parks explained how fish and wildlife rely heavily on the Milk River Project. He explained that there are three Wildlife Management Areas along the project: one near Dodson; one near Nelson Reservoir; and the third near Vandalia Dam. He also discussed a number of state programs available to landowners such as paying for the construction of 8-foot fence around hay yards.

Two other stops were made in Malta Irrigation District. A brief visit to the Dodson Pump site, where water is lifted 21 feet to irrigate about 1,000 acres. The second stop was at Point of Rocks Reservoir, an in-stream reservoir in Dodson South Canal with about 1,500 acre-feet of storage. Deb Pankratz, working on the Canal Efficiency Study for the Milk River Project Joint Board, spoke on several on-farm efficiency programs. She talked about the Agrimet weather station and how, when used with Crop Water Use Charts, it can help determine crop irrigation scheduling. The Agrimet Internet site is www.gp.usbr.gov/agrimet_station_list.htm. Deb also discussed the Hanson Moisture Meter and Surge Valve Loaner program available through the USBR.

At Bowdoin National Wildlife Refuge (NWR), tour participants got an idea of the challenges facing the refuge. The refuge provides habitat for many species of birds including the piping plover, listed as an threatened species. Bowdoin NWR receives water from the Milk River Project through the Dodson South Canal. Annual deliveries to the refuge average 3,500 acre-feet/year, and as much as 8,000 acre-feet in very wet years. Bowdoin NWR cannot drain water and, as a result, salinity levels are so high that aquatic life and game fish cannot survive. The US Fish and Wildlife Service(USFWS) is working with Montana Department of Environmental Quality and surrounding neighbors to come up with a solution to the salt issue.

The tour visited Nelson Reservoir. Nelson Reservoir is a 79,000 acre-foot off-stream storage facility built in 1915 for irrigation on the lower portion of Malta and Glasgow irrigation districts.

Paradise Valley Diversion Dam

(Tour Continued on Page 5)

DNRC Water Resources Offices Serve the Milk River

By Mike Dailey

The Havre and Glasgow DNRC Water Resources Regional Offices provide local assistance and service on water rights, administering the water law dealing with—new appropriations, adjudication, and maintaining a central water rights records system. Other services include assisting the dam safety program, floodplain management, water management, and watershed planning. The Havre office serves eight counties in north-central Montana including Blaine, Choteau, Glacier, Hill, Liberty, Pondera, Teton and Toole. The Glasgow office serves ten counties in northeast Montana including Daniels, Dawson, Garfield, McCone, Phillips, Richland, Roosevelt, Sheridan, Valley, and Wibaux.

Havre Regional Office - (left to right) Craig, Marvin, Kraig, Terri, Bob, Dixie and Jay

Havre Regional Office Staff:

Craig Biggart, Water Resource Specialist – Verification Completion Project
Marvin Cross, Civil Engineering Specialist
Kraig VanVoast, Water Resource Specialist – Adjudication
Terri Peterson, Program Assistant (the real boss)
Bob Larson, Regional Office Manager – Havre and Glasgow
Dixie Brough, Water Resource Specialist – New Appropriations
Jay Johnson, Water Resource Specialist – Adjudication

Glasgow Regional Office - (left to right) Mike, Denise, Pam and Ann

Glasgow Regional Office Staff:

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Hugh Brookie	Vice-Chairman	Malta Irr. Dist.	**Ralph Snider**	Member	Harlem Irr. Dist.
Melvin Novak	Secretary	Glasgow Irr. Dist.	**Bruce Anderson**	Member	Paradise Valley Irr. Dist.
Leo Cornwell	Member	Glasgow Irr. Dist.	**Brad Tilleman**	Member	Zurich Irr. Dist.
Jack Gist	Member	Alfalfa Valley Irr. Dist.	**Joe Nicholson**	Member	Dodson Irr. Dist.

Coordinator's Corner

By Jim Thompson

I've been involved with Milk River International Alliance for one year. I've met some fine concerned folks as my understanding of watershed issues expand.

The Alliance has been involved with the initial development of a Water Quality Plan. We have gathered pertinent data and information concerning water quality in the basin. Now it's time for the Alliance, working with its Technical Advisory Group, to review this material and come up with the first round of recommendations. Once these recommendations are developed public meetings will be held with Conservation and Irrigation districts. Local input will be very important. The details surrounding the meetings will be disseminated well in advance. Needless to say it soon will be time to stop talking and START chalking, as your input will be very important.

The Alliance is a group of concerned citizens. There is one requirement for Alliance membership: an interest in what's happening in the basin. As a member, you'll receive updates of all monthly meetings, which are open to the public. You'll be asked for your input relating to basin issues, costing nothing more than your time. To get on the mailing list, email Patti at MRIA@sudsol.com or call Jim at 406/367-5125.

I ran into my friend the other day that raises geese along the Milk. He seemed a little depressed and down hearted that some out-of-state hunters had mistaken his tame geese for wild ones and thinned his flock somewhat. Well I said, "It's rare but I guess things like that happen." "Oh," he said, "that ain't what's really bothering me. What's really bothering me is they were guided by an outfitter out of Helena." I scratched my head and said, "I'll be darned." ✓

(Hi-Line Tour Continued from Page 3)

Nelson Reservoir has become a popular recreation area, especially for boating and fishing, and provides important wildlife habitat. Maximum reservoir levels must be established by May 15 to prevent inundating piping plover nests along the shore. Typically, 2-4 piping plover pairs nest there annually. Unlike Bowdoin NWR, Nelson was not designated as "critical habitat" in large part due to a close working relationship between USFWS, USBR and Malta Irrigation District, and a pragmatic management plan that has been in place since 1986.

The final stop on the tour was Vandalia Dam. It was built in 1917 and is also in need of major repair. Glasgow Irrigation District installed a hydraulic pump, electricity, and a telephone line, allowing remote operation of the dam from the district office located over 20 miles away. The total cost to automate remote operations was about $56,000, but will save labor costs of making daily trips to the dam and allow for more accurate water management, which in the long run, saves water. ✓

HI-LINE WIND SOCK
STRENGTH OF WIND FROM CHAIN ANGLE
0° BROKEN—NOTIFY METEOROLOGIST
30° FRESH BREEZE
45° GENTLE ZEPHYR
60° HURRICANE IN AREA
75° BEWARE OF LOW FLYING TRAINS
90° WELCOME TO THE HI-LINE

MRIA extends a word of thanks to all the individuals and agencies that made this tour a success!

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Milk River Project Storage on November 1 and Expected Storage on March 1

Reservoir	Storage in acre-feet	Percent of Normal	Percent of Full	March 1 Expected Storage, acre-feet
Sherburne	6,100	55	9	19,000
Fresno	48,300	123	52	42,000
Nelson	49,700	115	82	44,000

Storage in Fresno Reservoir on November 1 is the most storage on this date since 1999 and storage in Nelson Reservoir is the most since 1998. The above average storage in the basin should allow for a more normal start of the irrigation season in 2003. Irrigation was started considerably later than normal over the past three years because of the drought. ✓

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Lt. Governor Ohs Meets with Alberta Officials on New Dam Proposal

By Marv Cross, DNRC

Montana's Lieutenant Governor, Karl Ohs, and Alberta's Minister of the Environment, Lorne Taylor established a working team to determine whether a proposed dam on the Milk River in Alberta could have mutual benefits for both Alberta and Montana. Ohs and Taylor met in Milk River, Alberta on November 22nd along with a host of officials from their respective governments. The meeting was held at the request of a grass roots Alberta group known as the Milk River Basin Water Management Committee (Alberta Committee). Arrangements for the meeting were made by the Alberta Committee in cooperation with the Milk River International Alliance (MRIA), a local watershed group based in Montana with membership from both Montana and Canada. The Alberta Committee hosted a wonderful lunch for the participants.

Lt. Governor Ohs talks with Alberta water users about the Alberta storage project in Milk River, Alberta.

Alberta is interested in developing new irrigation and other water uses in the Milk River basin. Taylor opened the meeting by stating, "The purpose (of the meeting) is to start a formal process for performing a study." The goal of the study would be to examine potential benefits of a Milk River storage project in Alberta for both Alberta and Montana. Through this process, Montana would be able to decide whether to participate in the project. According to Taylor, "Alberta has significant water issues in the basin and has committed funds to conduct a feasibility study that will look at both on and off-stream storage options." However, Taylor made it clear that for a dam to be constructed on the Milk River in Alberta, two things must happen. First, the project must be economically feasible and second, American cooperation is essential. Taylor added, "For anything (construction of a dam) to happen, we must have American dollars. If studies indicate that there is enough mutual benefits, perhaps we can move forward."

Lt. Governor Karl Ohs, noted, "I know the Milk River well as my

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Paradise Valley Receives Leadership Award in Water Conservation

By Mike Dailey, DNRC

Water conservation is a tough sell in the Milk River basin. Especially, when there is a lackluster economy, chronic water shortages, and an uncertain water supply. But the Paradise Valley Irrigation District doesn't see water conservation as a liability. It sees it as a future investment.

The District developed and then implemented a water conservation plan during the 1999 irrigation season and has never looked back. The District lacked data for making good decisions, so it established a water measurement program. They installed measuring devices and data recorders on major drains and canals. What a challenge! Standard measuring devices such as flumes and weirs would not work, as the Milk River gradient was too flat. They chose electronic meters that use acoustic Doppler technology. They also purchased a portable prop meter for the ditch rider to measure individual outlets. For the first time, water was being measured at the turnouts and allocated to individual water users based on actual water use. They saw immediate results. Overall water management began to improve and water was being distributed fairly.

Paradise Valley used these data to develop a water budget and to make better decisions. For example, the Hillside Ditch was known for its seepage and operational problems. But no one knew how bad the problems were.

As suspected, the water budget showed that the Hillside Ditch would be a significant challenge to correct. The district developed a radical conservation plan to reconfigure the Hillside Ditch with a new pump and pipeline to replace inefficient portions of the canal. To pay for these improvements, funds are being actively pursued from the DNRC Renewable Resource Grant program, the USBR Water Conservation and Field Services Program, the NRCS Environmental Quality Incentive Program commonly known as EQIP, and from the district water user fund.

The Bureau of Reclamation recognizing the district's progressive leadership in water conservation presented it with the 2001 Commissioner's Water Conservation Award for the Great Plains Region. The Bureau gives this award to individuals and entities that have demonstrated significant accomplishments for improving water use efficiency. "We're committed to water conservation," stated Bim Strausser, president of Paradise Valley. "We've replaced 22 old turnouts with new standardized turnouts on a large lateral, and we plan on replacing an additional 70 turnouts over the next three years." The broad goals of Paradise Valley are to improve conveyance efficiency from the current 40 percent to 50 percent over the next 10 years, and then to 60 percent within 20 years, and to improve on-farm efficiencies from 23 percent to 50 percent over the next thirteen years.

The Paradise Valley Irrigation District commits about $8,700 of its own funds annually to water conservation. The district also employs a part-time coordinator to assist in defining and solving water problems.

When you see Commissioners Bim Strausser, Bruce Anderson, or Pat Molyneaux, congratulate them on their award and commitment to water conservation.

Paradise Valley Irrigation District Commissioners Bim Strausser and Bruce Anderson accept the 2001 Commissioner's Water Conservation Award for the Great Plains Region from Mark Limbaugh of External and Intergovernmental Affairs, Washington D.C., on behalf of John W. Keyes III, the US Bureau of Reclamation Commissioner. The ceremony was held at Canyon Ferry Dam on July 15, 2002.

(Dam Proposal Continued from Page 1)

family homesteaded near Malta in an area now served by irrigation from the Milk River." He further stated, "Montana is willing to work with Alberta to find out if there are mutual benefits for both countries."

According to Rich Moy, Water Management Bureau Chief for Montana's Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, the idea of a dam on the Milk River in Alberta is not a new concept. In the mid-1980's Moy served as Chairperson of a Montana delegation on a technical team that studied the feasibility of a similar project. However, a change in the political and economic climate in Alberta forced the 1980's effort to be discontinued.

To date, Alberta has never used their full allocation of the natural flow of the Milk River in accordance with the 1909 Boundary Waters Treaty. In fact, a 1980 study completed by the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration of Canada, identified that in over half of the 60 years of record, Alberta was entitled to an average of 34,000 acre-feet of water that passed into Montana.

The Alberta Committee would like to use this water. They are spearheading an effort to update the 1980's studies. This group hopes to store Alberta's share of the Milk when the water is available, allowing up to 15,000 acres of new irrigation to be developed and to stabilize municipal water supplies. According to Tom Gilcrest, Chairman of the Alberta Committee, the dam would provide a more reliable supply of municipal water to local towns of Milk River and Coutts, Alberta and Sweetgrass, Montana.

Of course, Alberta's unused share of the Milk has been stored in Fresno and Nelson reservoirs or directly diverted and used in Montana. The Alberta Committee knows that its Montana neighbors have historically used Alberta's share of the Milk River and they do not want to inflict additional pain on Montana water users. The Alberta Committee believes that by building a larger dam in Alberta, the additional storage capacity could be used by Montana to help compensate for losses to the Milk River Project. They also feel that a cooperative venture could help improve basin wide water management that would benefit both countries.

Alberta and Montana officials discuss the process for studying the new Milk River Storage Project.

Besides more storage for Montana, the Alberta Committee sees other potential benefits for Montana: less sedimentation downstream into Fresno Reservoir, reduced flood damage in the basin, and the potential for back-up storage when the St. Mary Canal needs repair as occurred during the summer of 2002. With the recent problems associated with the St. Mary Canal and the Montana's heavy reliance on Alberta's share of the Milk, the Alberta Committee hopes Montana's water users are interested in participating in the study.

The preferred dam site, called the "Forks Site" is located three miles downstream from the confluence with North Milk River, which would be about 12 miles west of the town of Milk River. In 1986, the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration examined three sizes for the Forks Site dam and reservoir. The largest size, called the topographic limit, would be 147 ft. high and hold 250,000 acre-feet of water. The next size, referred to as the "High Level" dam, would be 140 feet high and hold about 200,000 acre-feet of water. The smallest of the three sizes, called the "Intermediate II" alternative would be 127 feet high and hold about 134,000 acre-feet of water (nearly the same volume of water that Fresno Dam was originally designed to hold). The Alberta Committee has indicated that the Intermediate II size would meet Alberta's needs.

There is little doubt that construction of any of the three alternatives would have drastic effects on Montana's water supply. Any additional depletion will exacerbate existing shortages for the Milk River Project. However, Alberta feels the "High Level" alternative could meet Alberta's needs, but also supply substantial

(Dam Proposal Continued on Page 4)

(Dam Proposal Continued from page 3)

new storage for Montana users. The Alberta Committee hopes that the additional storage provided in the "High Level" dam might actually improve Montana's supply enough to encourage the investment of American dollars to build the structure.

Moy remains hopeful. Results from the 1980's study indicated that Montana would need to take more water from the St. Mary River into the Milk River to make the project feasible. He also pointed out that presently Montana passes its surplus water into Alberta from the St. Mary River just as Alberta passes its surplus Milk River water to Montana. If Montana could transfer more of its St. Mary water into the new Alberta dam, the project could become more attractive. However, the canal is presently limited both by age-induced deterioration and total capacity. If repairing and enlarging the St. Mary canal is feasible, then perhaps the Alberta dam may benefit Montana.

Presently, the Bureau of Reclamation is conducting the North Central Regional Feasibility Study that is identifying options for resolving regional water supply problems. One of the options being considered is repair and possible enlargement of the canal. The results of the study will be crucial to the Alberta Dam analysis. According to Brent Esplin, the Bureau of Reclamation Study Coordinator, the study is a part of the Rocky Boy's Reservation Indian Reserved Water Rights Settlement and Water Supply Enhancement Act of 1999. Esplin explained that Congress authorized "a regional feasibility study to evaluate water and related resources in North-Central Montana in order to determine the limitation of those resources and how those resources can best be managed and developed to serve the needs of the citizens of Montana." One of the requirements of the Act is that the study "be planned and conducted in consultation with all affected interests, including interests in Canada."

So far, Esplin's team, with the help of local and state personnel, has identified major water issues within the north central Montana region and prepared a list of potential alternatives to address these issues. One of the primary issues addressed is water supply (or perhaps the lack of water supply might be a better description). Structural alternatives addressed to date include, enlarging Fresno Dam, installing a pumping plant to transfer water from the Milk River into Nelson reservoir, and rehabilitating the St. Mary Canal to higher capacities. It is possible that storage in the proposed Alberta Dam could be incorporated into the updated hydrology model being used by the Bureau to evaluate the benefits and cost of the alternatives being considered. If the Bureau incorporates the proposed Alberta Dam into its hydrology model, the analysis would be accomplished in close cooperation with DNRC's hydrologists. A target date for completion of Esplin's study is some time during the summer of 2003. In the mean time, Alberta is forging ahead with contracts to update its feasibility studies.

Alberta plans on keeping Montana officials involved with the feasibility study. Alberta would also like to conduct informational meetings in Montana as the feasibility study progresses.

Alan Pentney, Regional Approvals Manager of the Southern Region of Alberta Environment, explained that once the present Alberta Feasibility Study is completed and the project is determined to be feasible, a number of regulatory processes must be complied with before dam construction can begin. For example, international agreements would need to be established, funds authorized, and an environmental impact assessment prepared. A joint Canadian Federal/Provincial hearing will need to be held before Alberta's Natural Resources Conservation Board. Once those steps are completed, International Joint Commission approval will be sought before a number of local and federal approvals for construction and operation of the dam can be acquired.

Garry Bucharski, head of the Technical Support Section of Water Projects for Environmental Operations for Alberta, explained that once all the local and federal approvals are obtained and the project receives authority to proceed, site investigations and detailed design and cost estimates would be prepared. Final design and the Environmental Impact Assessment process should take from 5 to 7 years with actual construction taking two additional years to complete.

Even with all of these hurdles to overcome, the Alberta Committee remains hopeful that there will be enough benefits for both Alberta and Montana to support construction. ✓

Coordinator's Corner

By Jim Thompson

So, what's the Milk River Inter national Alliance been up over the past few months? In October, we began a number of new projects.

Working with the Hill County Conservation District, we submitted a grant application to address bank erosion along the Milk River in Hill County. The goals of the project are two-fold: Design a streambank stabilization project for addressing loss of agricultural land and sediment loading in the Milk River; and to provide an opportunity for basin stakeholders to work together on a project that addresses resource issues.

We continue to work with the Blaine County Conservation District on its Water Quality Assessment Project. We are in the process of writing another 319 Grant proposal for the next phase of the work. We want to evaluate all the information compiled in phase I. If the information does not paint a complete picture of water quality, we hope to identify where additional information is needed to establish our baseline.

Over the next three months, we want to start some educational and weed management projects. The beginning of the year should be busy, interesting, and hopefully beneficial to all.

I stopped by and had coffee with a friend and his wife that raise geese along the Milk. Sitting at the kitchen table, I could tell they were a little nervous about something.

On the second cup of coffee, my friend said, "you know, it may be another dry year and me and the wife are thinking about increasing the size of our goose pond, which will take some sort of permit."

"Does that have you upset?" I asked. "Oh! Heavens no, the Federal Agencies are helping us all they can. They said if they can afford it they may help with the costs."

"So what's got you upset?" I asked. "Well, Jim," he said. "Maybe you can help us figure out the load the geese put in the pond." I looked out his kitchen window and watched the geese waddling out on the driveway and said, "I do have a couple of ideas, but knowing the nature of geese, it can be frustrating, oops! There went another one." ✓

The Milk River Watershed News will now be available on-line at:
http://www.dnrc.state.mt.us/wrd/Newsletters.htm.

If you wish to be contacted via e-mail when new newsletters are published, instead of receiving a hard copy, please e-mail us at droubidoux@state.mt.us.

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Water Supply Looks Better Than Last Year

By R. Scott Guenthner, U.S. Bureau of Reclamation

Good news so far. Storage in Fresno and Nelson Reservoirs is much better than in past years. High runoff from the June 8-11, 2002 rainstorm helped fill Fresno and than above normal rainfall across the basin in July and August helped the whole basin. On January 23, 2003, reservoir storage was above average for both Fresno and Nelson Reservoirs (Note table below). Storage in these reservoirs has not been this good since 1999. As expected, storage in Lake Sherburne is below normal primarily because a large amount of water was transferred to Fresno Reservoir last fall. This should help avoid a delay in the start of the irrigation season even if below normal runoff occurs this spring.

The mountain snowpack in the St. Mary River Drainage is still only 65 percent of average, much like the rest of Montana east of the Continental Divide. The runoff forecast for January 1 indicates the runoff in the St. Mary River is expected to be about 67 percent of average, and the Milk River upstream of Fresno Reservoir is expected to be only 40 percent of average. These forecasts will be again updated on February 1, and the first of each month through May. More snow in the mountains is needed before water users can receive a normal supply this coming spring. Watch for the early March snow condition report, as it is the best indicator of the amount of water supply that water users can be expected for the upcoming irrigation season. ✓

Reservoir	Storage in acre-feet	Percent of Normal	Percent of Full
Lake Sherburne	12,800	59	29
Fresno Reservoir	50,800	139	54
Nelson Reservoir	40,900	106	68

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